

Exploring the Emersonian Archetype of ‘The Poet’ in Tagore

Dr. Prashant Luthra

Assistant Professor, Department of Languages and Literature, Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Learning, Prasanthi Nilayam(AP)

Abstract

Rabindranath Tagore and Ralph Waldo Emerson stand out among the literary greats as deep thinkers whose ideas have stood the test of time and culture. The idea that the poet is a seer and a channel for universal truths is one that Emerson, a key figure in American transcendentalism, outlined in his influential essay "The Poet." The renowned Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore—the first non-European Nobel Prize in Literature—embodies similar ideas through his spiritually profound and poetically beautiful works. This essay examines how Tagore's practical experience as a poet and Emerson's theoretical ideal of the poet coincide. The research reveals how Tagore embodies and develops Emersonian principles by contrasting his poetry expressions with Emerson's philosophical ideas. The study reflects the attributes Emerson gave to the real poet by shedding light on Tagore's deep connection to nature, his expression of beauty, and his philosophical depth through a comparative examination. This investigation honours their ideas' eternal significance and their words' unwavering capacity to uplift and inspire people.

Keywords: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Rabindranath Tagore, Transcendentalism, The Poet, Comparative Literature, Emersonian Ideals

INTRODUCTION

‘The Poet’, an essay by Ralph Waldo Emerson, is a thorough examination of the nature, function, and obligations of the poet in society. Composed within the framework of Emerson's more expansive transcendentalist ideology, the essay portrays the poet as a visionary who unveils more profound realities about life, beauty, and the human soul, in addition to being a poet. Emerson contends that poets are endowed with a special wisdom that bridges the gap between the individual and the universal, the spiritual and the physical. By arguing that genuine poetry originates from a passionate connection with life and nature, Emerson challenges society's emphasis on technical proficiency and surface-level beauty. He demands a new generation of American poets who can honour the country's distinctive experiences and varied landscapes, turning the raw material into works of art that speak to all people. In this essay, Emerson asks readers to re-evaluate poetry's capacity to influence people and society.

According to him, the poet is the one who gives shape to the formless and voice to the inexpressible. The poet acts as a lighthouse of truth and beauty, pointing people in the direction of a greater comprehension of life in a culture that is frequently misled by worldly goals and shallow ideals. A greater understanding of the inherent value and interdependence of everything is fostered by the poet's insights and disclosures, which serve as a source of inspiration.

Born in Bengal in India, on May 7, 1861, Rabindranath Tagore became one of the most important writers of the 19th and 20th century. Tagore gained international recognition for his writing prowess, which included plays, essays, novels, and poetry. He became the first non-European laureate to win the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913 with his book *Gitanjali* (Song Offerings). Deep spiritual understanding, a close relationship with nature, and a great deal of empathy for human suffering are all evident in Tagore's writings.

Beyond his writings, Tagore was a pioneering scholar who promoted a comprehensive fusion of Eastern and Western education by founding Visva-Bharati University in Santiniketan. In addition, he was a strong supporter of intellectual and cultural freedom and made a substantial contribution to the Indian independence cause.

In this article, we will examine the landscapes of Emerson's transcendental philosophy and Tagore's poetic cosmology to see where they overlap. We will examine how Emerson's attributes for the ideal poet are reflected in Tagore's deep intellectual understanding, expression of beauty, and close relationship with nature. There is a striking parallel between Rabindranath Tagore, the famous Bengali poet, and Emerson's ideal poet, as outlined in his essay "The Poet," in their examination of these subjects. Both poets provide insights into the timeless and the divine via their writings, transcending the everyday. We discover a rich tapestry of ideas that unites these two great thinkers across borders and cultures when we combine the principles of Ralph Waldo Emerson with the poetry of Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore, whose life and writings have a strong resonance with the transcendentalist philosophy, is a living embodiment of Emerson's idea of the poet as a seer and sayer. This synthesis provides a timeless insight on the universal duty of the poet in addition to a profound grasp of both personalities.

Discussion

Emerson asserts that the poet's ability to perceive and articulate universal truths is extraordinary. He writes, "The poet is the sayer, the namer, and represents beauty. He is a sovereign, and stands on the centre." (Emerson 321) According to Emerson, the poet's vision penetrates the surface and reveals the timeless truths that unite the universe.

Gitanjali by Tagore is a thorough expression of this Emersonian ideal. Tagore writes, "My poet, is it thy delight to see thy creation through my eyes and to stand at the portals of my ears silently to listen to thine own eternal harmony? / Thy world is weaving words in my mind and thy joy is adding music to them. Thou givest thyself to me in love and then feelest thine own entire sweetness in me." (Tagore, *Gitanjali* 52) Here, he presents the poet as a conduit for heavenly joy and beauty as much as a creation. God's happiness and harmony are expressed through Tagore, implying that artistic endeavours are a communal celebration of beauty and divinity in which the poet and the Creator are bound together in love and creative fulfilment.

A visionary, in Emerson's opinion, is a poet who perceives and articulates the sublime truths that underpin reality. "The sign and credentials of the poet are that he announces that which no man foretold. He is the true and only doctor; he knows and tells; he is the only teller of news, for he was present and privy to the appearance which he describes. He is a beholder of ideas and an utterer of the necessary and causal" (Emerson 322). Therefore, the poet is not just a verse artist but also a "beholder of ideas," with the profound capacity to articulate what is "necessary and causal"—the essential truths and causes that underlie reality. Tagore's poetry aim is well aligned with this duty as a seer who sees beyond the mundane. Tagore frequently touches on the timeless in his poems, transcending the everyday. He says in the first

lines of Gitanjali, “At the immortal touch of thy hands my little heart loses its limits in joy and gives birth to utterance ineffable. Thy infinite gifts come to me only on these very small hands of mine. Ages pass, and still thou pourest, and still there is room to fill” (Tagore, Gitanjali 1). Although Tagore recognizes his insignificance in comparison to God's "infinite gifts," he is thankful for the constant flow since his "small hands" are constantly open to accept. The ageless and limitless flow of divine love and inspiration is encapsulated in the sentence, "Ages pass, and still thou pourest, and still there is room to fill" (1). which alludes to an unending, unbroken bond between the divine and mankind.

Emerson says “Of course the value of genius to us is in the veracity of its report. Talent may frolic and juggle; genius realizes and adds...It is the truest word ever spoken, and the phrase will be the fittest, most musical, and the unerring voice of the world for that time” (Emerson 324). This Emphasizes that a poet's words are the most authentic ever spoken, they are melodious, completely appropriate, and an unmistakable voice of the world for his time. Tagore words resonates this statement when he writes “I shall ever try to keep all untruths out from my thoughts, knowing that thou art that truth which has kindled the light of reason in my mind” (Tagore, Gitanjali 3). Tagore's wonder at the sublime generosity that gives him and his poetry perpetual inspiration is exquisitely conveyed in this poem. The core of the poet's unrelenting attempt to express the inexpressible, reflecting Emerson's faith in the poet's singular vision.

Emerson believed that the poet's words have to express the inherent truth and beauty of the universe. He asserts, " A beauty not explicable is dearer than a beauty which we can see to the end of. It is nature the symbol, nature certifying the supernatural, body overflowed by life which he worships with coarse but sincere rites" (Emerson 326). This Emersonian ideal is embodied in Tagore's lyrics through their deep simplicity and powerful imagery. In Gitanjali, he declares, "Light, my light, the world-filling light, the eye-kissing light, heart-sweetening light! /The butterflies spread their sails on the sea of light. Lilies and jasmines surge up on the crest of the waves of light. " (Tagore, Gitanjali 44) The poet's role as an expresser of truth and beauty is best exemplified by Tagore's ability to evoke the beauty of both the natural and spiritual realms with profound fervour.

A poet, in Emerson's view, is a whole man who embodies the ideal and who speaks for all of humanity. He writes “Notwithstanding this necessity to be published, adequate expression is rare. I know not how it is that we need an interpreter, but the great majority of men seem to be minors, who have not yet come into possession of their own, or mutes, who cannot report the conversation they have had with nature.” (Emerson 320) Therefore, by referring to the majority of people as "minors" and "mutes," Emerson implies that although many people have epiphanies or glimpses of the truth, they lack the means, bravery, or clarity to share these realizations. Tagore frequently employs nature in Gitanjali as a metaphor for spiritual transcendence and freedom. He writes, “The freedom of the wind is mine. Do you not feel a thrill passing through the air with the notes of the far-away song floating from the other shore?” (Tagore, Gitanjali 15), evoking images of wind and air as metaphors for freedom and limitless delight. Here, Tagore's creativity turns natural objects into symbols of spiritual freedom, giving readers a picture of nature as a force that motivates them to overcome social or individual constraints. This supports Emerson's more general theory that the poet acts as a liberator by allowing people to access and comprehend their own, sometimes unsaid, experiences and ideas.

When Emerson writes, “Too feeble fall the impressions of nature on us to make us artists. Every touch should thrill” (321), he means that for the poet or artist, these experiences should evoke such intense feelings or revelations that they must be communicated. The average person could see a tree or feel the wind, but the genuine artist experiences these natural phenomena so strongly that they inspire a desire to

share the experience. Emerson feels that the perceptions are "too feeble" to elicit genuine creative expression in the absence of this increased sensitivity or openness to nature's "thrill." Through nature, Tagore's imagination unites the divine and human in *Gitanjali*, emphasizing the interconnectedness of the natural world and the individual. In one of his famous lines, he writes, "The morning light has flooded my eyes—this is thy message to my heart. Thy face is bent from above, thy eyes look down on my eyes, and my heart has touched thy feet" (Tagore, *Gitanjali* 46). In this instance, he interprets morning light as a sign of spiritual rebirth and presents it as more than just sunshine. Readers are encouraged to view the natural world as having spiritual significance by Tagore's imaginative view of nature as an active, loving message from the divine.

The statement, "poetry was all written before time was," (Emerson 322) implies that poetry, or truth, exists in an ideal, timeless world that is outside of human conceptions and contains divine truths. This makes us wonder if we are just interpreters trying to comprehend and convey these timeless truths, or if there is something fundamentally wrong with our senses that causes us to "miswrite the poem" (322). According to Emerson, poetry is more than just an artistic pursuit; it is a mirror of a deep, divine truth, just like nature is both morally and aesthetically pleasing. He sees words and deeds as distinct manifestations of heavenly energy, making it difficult to distinguish between the two. Therefore, words and acts are only different ways of conveying the same ultimate truth rather than being distinct entities.

Tagore too examines the essence of life and the soul's relationship to the divine in *Gitanjali*, exploring issues of death, identity, and purpose. His poems reflect on mortality and the enigma of the soul's path after death. One powerful example is in the poem, where he contemplates death and the mystery of the soul's journey beyond life: "And because I love this life, I know I shall love death as well" (Tagore, *Gitanjali* 75). Tagore's existential belief that life and death are intertwined is reflected in this sentence, which implies that the soul's journey transcends the physical body. Here, he addresses the topic of what exists beyond death and reverently welcomes the unknown. Tagore further questions human identity and purpose, "This frail vessel thou emptiest again and again, and fillest it ever with fresh life" (Tagore, *Gitanjali* 1). He addresses the fleeting and cyclical character of existence by imagining himself as a vessel that is filled and emptied by divine will and suggests that human existence has significance within a divine order, even if that meaning is still obscure, as he wrestles with the issue of individual purpose within the universal context.

There is a strong feeling of existential inquiry in Tagore's poetry. He tackles important issues of life, death, love, identity, and purpose in works like as *Gitanjali*, *The Gardener*, *Fruit-Gathering*, *Crossing*, and *Stray Birds*. His investigation of these subjects reveals his realization that although human life is fleeting, all life is infused with and transcended by a divine mystery. Even when solutions are still unclear, Tagore's lyrical vision encourages readers to accept this mystery and discover value in the process of searching.

Emerson argued that a poem's potent, alive idea—rather than its rhythm or metre—is what really distinguishes it. He writes, "For it is not metres, but a metre-making argument that makes a poem,—a thought so passionate and alive that like the spirit of a plant or an animal it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing. The thought and the form are equal in the order of time, but in the order of genesis the thought is prior to the form" (Emerson 323). Tagore tackles this topic both openly and implicitly in his poem 'The Poet', which demonstrates his conviction that a poem's subject matter is more important than its form. In this poem, Tagore emphasizes that the poet's work should convey authentic feeling or resonate with the human condition, even if the poet's personal life does not mirror the sorrowful themes of their verse. This method is reflected in the poem's conversational and informal structure. Instead

of emphasizing formality, Tagore aims to communicate a philosophical concept in an approachable, somewhat prose-like manner. The sardonic, introspective tone, which pushes readers to consider the essence of poetry expression itself, takes precedence over the rhyme and meter. Tagore contends that poetry must emphasize emotional and philosophical content, utilizing form as a flexible vehicle to support the poem's main message, by illustrating how a poet might be at conflict with their written representation. Emerson asserts that the highest vision is given to a simple, pure soul that is contained in a neat, organized body. Substances like drugs simply create a “counterfeit excitement and fury” (Emerson 333); they do not inspire true creativity. Often regarded as a saint, Rabindranath Tagore's life exemplifies a deep philosophy based on compassion, spirituality, and universal love. W. B. Yeats commented in his introduction to *Gitanjali*, “He is the first among our saints who has not refused to live, but has spoken out of Life itself, and that is why we give him our love” (Yeats ix). A recurrent topic in his poetry and prose, his outlook—which was greatly influenced by the Upanishads—encouraged an active quest of self-realization and communion with the divine.

In *Gitanjali*, Tagore's quest for spiritual unity becomes evident when he writes, “Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads! Whom dost thou worship in this lonely dark corner of a temple with doors all shut?” (Tagore, *Gitanjali* 7). Here, he challenges flimsy traditions and stresses discovering the supernatural in everyday encounters and in helping others. As demonstrated in ‘The Religion of Man’, Tagore's conviction in global brotherhood further reflects his saintly nature. He emphasizes that genuine spirituality is found in seeing how intertwined all creatures are, and he promotes a personal relationship between each person and the divine. The founding of Santiniketan, a school that promoted spiritual and holistic development, is another example of Tagore's belief in leading a holy life. Here, he promoted a balanced existence that goes beyond material pursuits by encouraging his pupils to thoroughly interact with nature and the arts. Tagore lived a holy life via his writings, way of living, and educational philosophy, encouraging others to pursue inner divinity and compassion for all people.

For India, Tagore is the poet Emerson envisioned for America. Emerson laments the dearth of the poet he imagines—someone who bravely confronts the reality of their period and culture and connects with life on a profound level. The ideal poet for Emerson is one who embraces the responsibility of speaking honestly about the moral and spiritual condition of society and connects with life on a profound level. This poet has to have the guts to question flimsy conventions and investigate how contemporary beliefs affect people. In his statement, “I look in vain for the poet whom I describe” (Emerson 338), he berates modern poets for not having the guts to celebrate the commonplace bravery of current life or to speak honestly and simply about their experiences. Emerson's dissatisfaction with the absence of such a voice during his day is reflected in Tagore's own concern over the moral and ethical deterioration caused by industrialization and nationalism. Particularly when he criticizes the growth of nationalism in his ‘Nationalism’, Tagore strongly resembles Emerson's idea of a poet who bravely takes on the most important concerns of their day. Tagore's statement, “Yes, this is the logic of the Nation. And it will never heed the voice of truth and goodness,” (Tagore, *Nationalism* 55) reflects his rejection of nationalism's unrelenting quest for power, which he views as impeding moral development and stepping on humanity's living ideals. In line with Emerson's wish for a poet who is both a moral and sociological visionary, he laments that nationalism ignores the importance of religion and the basic, intrinsic goodness of people. By providing a prophetic criticism that questions society's acceptance of material growth at the price of moral considerations and spiritual values, Tagore appears to be realizing Emerson's ideal of a poet.

Conclusion

With their lives and works woven across the fabric of time and culture, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Rabindranath Tagore emerge as like-minded individuals in an intricate realm of words and knowledge. According to Emerson's transcendentalist perspective, the poet is a seer, a ruler of beauty, and a voice that expresses the highest realities of life. These exact principles are embodied by Tagore in his poetic journey, which reaches beyond the confines of his native Bengal to speak to the entire human soul.

A significant connection between Emerson's theoretical framework and Tagore's lyrical reality is shown in this study. Emerson's demand for a poet who sees the eternal in the transient, who conveys beauty with divine clarity, and who acts as a beacon for society is echoed in Tagore's lyrics. By bridging the gap between the concrete and the transcendental, the personal and the universal, Tagore embodies Emerson's poet in the brilliant lines of Gitanjali and other works.

The comparative study clarifies how Tagore's poetry both complements and builds upon Emerson's ideas. Emerson's ideal is mirrored and enhanced by Tagore's profound spiritual and philosophical reflections, his expression of beauty, his link to universal truths, and his significant social role. The eternal ability of the poetic spirit to uplift, inspire, and transform is demonstrated by Tagore.

We are reminded of the ageless character of these two literary titans' views as we consider their beautiful union. Together, Tagore's living example of that ideal and Emerson's conceptual poet enlighten the human experience, providing a ray of truth and beauty in a world too often cloaked in the banal. Their words still have an impact on us, urging us to appreciate the deep interdependence of all things, see beyond the mundane, and embrace the extraordinary.

Emerson and Tagore remind us of the poet's holy responsibility in this symphony of thought and expression: to inspire the human spirit to soar towards the divine, to articulate the inexpressible, and to unveil the secret harmonies of reality. Their enduring impact is proof of poetry's limitless capacity to uplift the spirit and change the world.

References

1. Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *The Complete Essays and Other Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Modern Library, 1950.
2. Tagore, Rabindranath. *Gitanjali*. Rupa Publications, 2022.
3. Tagore, Rabindranath. *Nationalism*. Book Club of California, 1917.
4. Tagore, Rabindranath. *The Essential Tagore*. Harvard University Press, 2011.
5. Tagore, Rabindranath. *The Religion of Man: International Edition*. Monkfish Book Publishing, 2022.
6. Yeats, W. B. "Introduction." *Gitanjali*, by Rabindranath Tagore, Macmillan, 1915, pp. vii–xxii.